

Handy and Winne—Marquesan Music

13

TYPES OF MARQUESAN CHANTS

MEANING AND USE

For the sake of convenience, the chants of the Marquesans may be classified as follows: recreational, eulogistic, and religious. This differentiation is by no means clear-cut, for the classes overlap; thus the recreational songs were often eulogistic, and those classified as eulogistic were frequently sacred. The native would classify his chants as tapu or not tapu, depending upon the circumstances surrounding their composition and use. Those called tapu, or sacred, would be the chants composed with a definite serious purpose in view, such as recital at a feast or rite, and rehearsed and performed under restrictions of tapu; while the others would be old songs that had served their purpose and were repeated for amusement, or songs, such as the *nani*, that had no purpose other than recreation. 533

In their recreational singing, the joyous spirit of the natives found free expression; and yet many of these chants were by no means entirely play, for such songs as the *ru'u*, *nani*, and *tape'a* were prepared, rehearsed and performed with as much care and effort as were the more serious eulogistic and religious compositions. The choruses that sang the recreational songs and the eulogistic chants, such as the *putu* and *pipine*, that were composed in honor of a youth or maid, drew their membership from the class of adolescent boys and girls known as *ka'ioi*. Under this term were included all the youth of the tribe who, obeying their natural instincts and following the immemorial custom of their people, "ran wild" during the early years of their maturity, devoting themselves without restraint to all pleasure, and to self-adornment. The *ka'ioi* were recognizable by the excessive use of perfumed coconut oil on bodies and hair, by the dyeing of bodies and clothing with the yellow or golden stain derived from the wild ginger root, by such self-adornment as crowns and necklaces of flowers—particularly strings of the pungent, heavy-scented pandanus seeds—and by their never-ending frolics and escapades. But the play of the *ka'ioi* was not wholly unproductive. The youths did the work of erecting some of the special structures for feasts and rites, and both the male and female *ka'ioi* constituted the choruses that sang recreational songs and the eulogistic chants at festivals in honor of young persons. The Marquesans, true to the ideal of perfection which we may trace in their every activity in the old days, prepared and performed their recreational choral songs with all the thoroughness and concentration of effort that they gave to their most important religious choirs. 535

But there must have been a very different atmosphere about the songs 537^x

MARQUESAN CULTURE

147

specialized in particular occupations, such as canoe making or ⁴³⁸carving. The products were distributed by means of a thoroughly organized trade in the form of social visits with gift ⁴³⁸exchanges. A tribe specializing in yellow dye would arrive with ⁵⁷⁴canoe-loads of the stuff. These expeditions were led by the chief, who was accompanied by perhaps one hundred men. They would start with a formal social gathering, during which sexual ^[837]hospitality was usually extended to the visitors. Then the cargoes were presented. No mention was made of payment, but just before the visitors left, they would suggest indirectly that there was a shortage of a certain commodity in their tribe. Their hosts would then beg them to accept of their surplus of this commodity. The exchange was carried on with mutual benefit but no attempt to drive a shrewd bargain. Although a ^[422]few objects might be brought for personal trade, the main load of the tribe's specialty was owned by the chief, and private individuals could not use any of it for trade purposes. Trade was organized by the chief, but at the close of the transaction, the goods would be prorated to all members of the tribe. Individual surpluses were exchanged on a quite similar basis, care being taken to eliminate the profit motive in all cases. These trade visits were still going on while I was in the Marquesas, although they had become of little importance.

Imperishable property, such as weapons, carvings, tools, and ⁴³⁸ornaments, was constantly changing hands, but the objects ^[552]retained their names and individuality in the transfer. Gift ^[437]exchange was as essential to social prestige as the giving of feasts. There is no question that, by primitive standards, the Marquesans were a wealthy group. All the early explorers made mention of the great number of things they had in their houses, rows of weapons, carved bowls, mats, etc. The explanation lies ^[517]in the fact that they had a great deal of leisure, which they employed in making things. These articles were accumulated and handed down.

The Marquesans had a high standard of comfort. Their beds ^[517]were the most luxurious to be found in the South Seas. The ⁵¹³₃₅₂

entire rear half of the houses, which were often fifty or sixty feet long, was given up to the beds. The bed had a foundation of springy brush, cocoanut fronds, ferns, and layers of grass, on top of which were placed woven mats. A polished cocoanut log running the entire length of the house served as a pillow. These beds were softer than many European beds, and the natives loafed on them when they had nothing else to do. They also built sloping back-rests on the stone house platforms so that they could sit there in comfort and watch everything that went on up and down the street. Clothing was unnecessary in this climate, but the Marquesans made elaborate ornaments for festival wear.

An ambitious, skillful man could use the leisure periods between harvests to create a surplus through craftsmanship or pig tending. However, if one was not ambitious, one could spend his leisure time loafing, singing, playing musical instruments or games, and, even to a considerable degree, in sexual play.

ATTITUDE TOWARD OBJECTS

There was an amazing degree of individualization of objects among the Marquesans, everything being personified. Just as each individual was a distinct entity in his tribe, so every axe or food bowl or canoe was also a distinct entity and had a name. The same names were given to objects as to people, the names for weapons being taken from ancestral names of the owner's family. All canoes were given names, and a house not only went through the process of creation, but was hung with a loin cloth so that it would be decently clad when occupied.

It is difficult to say just how much the natives actually believed in this personification of objects. A properly made object achieved greater prestige value with use. A club which had killed three or four men had a tremendous amount of *mana*; the more *mana*, the greater the distinction of the weapon. The people had a sense for heirlooms; old objects which had been handed down had more value than new ones, even though the new ones boasted finer carving.